Christine Wallace review of Tom D. C. Roberts, 


When Keith Murdoch died in 1952, the *Herald and Weekly Times* published a 62-page encomium, *Keith Murdoch, Journalist.*¹ Referred to in house as the ‘Sir Keith Murdoch Tribute Book’, a limited edition of 2,500 copies was published for staff, friends and business associates.² The brilliant and beneficent Murdoch of the ‘tribute book’—son of Scottish migrants to Melbourne, Rev. Patrick Murdoch and wife Annie (née Brown), and nephew of esteemed Australian academic and essayist Walter Murdoch—was a visionary who built Australia’s first national media empire. It barely mentioned his son, Keith Rupert Murdoch, 21 years old at the time, who seized the patriarch’s news baton and built the world’s most powerful international media empire.

Keith and Rupert Murdoch, father and son, are two of the most historically significant Australians ever. Yet within a few months of Keith’s death in 1952 his name ‘had already begun to fade’ even in Melbourne, one of his former journalists John Hetherington wrote in 1960, ‘where in life he had made so enormous a rumble-bumble’.³ Not so Rupert, whose global renown—or notoriety, depending on one’s point of view—is well established and which, should he live as long as his late mother Elisabeth Murdoch (née Greene) to whom he bears such a striking resemblance, is set to continue until 2034 at least.

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The Murdoch family story underlines the past’s deep reach into the present. Patrick Murdoch was a friend of David Syme, owner of Melbourne’s Age newspaper and Australia’s most significant media figure prior to the Murdoch ascendancy. Rev. Murdoch officiated at Syme’s burial in 1908. A year earlier the family connection got teenage Keith his first reporting job, contributing suburban news to the Age at one and a half pennies a line. Patrick Murdoch was a sociable Presbyterian minister, a ‘golfing parson’ with a wide social circle which, in addition to Syme, included senior politicians like Andrew Fisher, Alfred Deakin and Robert Menzies (TR, p. 31). His shy, stammering son Keith was thus born to a family with connections, a position from which, applying grit, industry and ambition, he leveraged into so much more. In turn Keith’s charming, socially assured son Rupert was born to a family with even better connections, a position from which, applying grit, industry and ambition, he achieved so much more again. This is the positive side of the Murdoch family story—one in which, with its bold national and, later, international business gambits, there is much to admire.

There is also an unattractive, even disturbing, side to the story. Tom D. C. Roberts’s argument in Before Rupert is that what Keith Murdoch actually did has been largely obscured by half a century of Murdoch family media manipulation and image management, and that Rupert’s operating methods and business strategies follow a pattern established by his father before him. Further, Roberts persuasively shows it is a formula built on pursuit of, where possible, monopoly profit and, routinely, the exercise of media power for political purposes aligned with the Murdochs’ personal views and plutocratic interests. This is an argument demanding urgent national and international attention given the Murdoch-controlled News Corporation’s platforming of increasingly extreme right-wing populism in the western democracies, of which Fox News in the United States is the apotheosis.

Roberts’s Before Rupert was preceded by R. M. Younger’s Keith Murdoch: Founder of a Media Empire (2003), Desmond Zwar’s In Search of Keith Murdoch (1980) and Keith Murdoch, Journalist, the ‘tribute book’ described earlier. He shows how these works were captive to Murdoch family influence. The Younger and Zwar books drew selectively on an unpublished biographical manuscript, ‘A Life of Keith Murdoch, Newspaper Reporter’, by journalist-historian and David Syme biographer C. E. ‘Ted’ Sayers, which survives in Keith Murdoch’s papers at the National Library of Australia. It formed the basis of a book commissioned by the Murdoch family

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that Rupert refused to allow into the public realm despite it being under contract to publisher William Heinemann, and its unusual status as a prize-winning biography while still in manuscript form (TR, p. xv). Sayers’s book—a ‘friendly’ that he dedicated to Keith’s widow Elisabeth Murdoch (née Greene)—was apparently just not friendly enough.

As the first independent, unauthorised biography of Keith Murdoch, Roberts’s *Before Rupert*, if not itself an indictment of the state of biography in Australia, certainly points to dire gaps. Why has it taken so long for a book-length biography of Keith Murdoch unconstrained by Murdoch family influence to appear? It is not as though clues concerning the need for one were not there, even in the most hagiographical of existing works on him. In different parts of the *Herald and Weekly Times* ‘tribute book’, for example, he is described as ‘mildly conservative’ and ‘a revolutionary conservative’. The ‘tribute book’ may have been written by committee, differing estimations like these reflecting differing viewpoints from different contributors. However, the encomium itself suggests it was more a matter of Murdoch in public muting a ‘revolutionary’ conservatism, ‘evident in his published writings, but even more so in the confidential commentaries he wrote about his own newspapers’. This should have been a matter for hot pursuit by biographers, academic and otherwise.

For here lies intriguing potential roots for the savage right turn Rupert has taken with News Corporation as he has aged. The historical perspective Roberts’s book on the father gives on the son’s rise and machinations provides a template and context for Rupert’s monopolistic drives and taste for the catnip of political power and rent-seeking, faults that have lately morphed into enabling far-right zealotry. It is hard to imagine the rise of the Tea Party in the United States, for example, without the platform and profile provided by Fox News; and without the Tea Party, it is hard to conceive of the Donald Trump presidency. This is beyond the scope of Roberts’s book, which was published in 2015 before Trump’s election, but provides meat for a potential second edition or, intriguingly, for a dual Keith and Rupert Murdoch biography that shows the operational, psychological and political continuities between them over time against the backdrop of changing twentieth- and twenty-first-century economic, technological and cultural regimes. Perhaps it is even the time for a collective biography adding the third generation of media Murdoch children—Lachlan, Elisabeth and James, born to Rupert and his second wife, journalist Anna Murdoch (née Torv)—the eldest of whom, Lachlan, is reputedly more right wing than even his father.

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8 *Keith Murdoch, Journalist*, 53 and 22.

Roberts has done a better job as a biographer than his predecessors not only because he is not captive to Murdoch family sentiment but also because he has brought scholarly thinking, skills and resources to a subject with clear dividends. Before Rupert began life as a doctoral thesis concentrating on Keith Murdoch’s early life, from his birth in 1885 to Rupert’s birth in the early 1930s by which time the ‘Murdoch Press’ was already a known term synonymous, Roberts writes, with the interests of business during the Depression. The papers of Adelaide Advertiser managing editor and Murdoch confidant Lloyd Dumas proved a critical, previously unconsulted source among others for the biography. For the book of the thesis, which won the National Biography Award in 2017, Roberts extended the chronology through to Keith Murdoch’s death in 1952 and added an epilogue on Rupert’s rise in his wake.

A few matters of scholarly interest were trimmed along the way, for example the account of correspondence in 1959 between the then foreign minister Richard Casey and Keith Hancock, professor of history at The Australian National University and founding chair of the Australian Dictionary of Biography, concerning Elisabeth Murdoch’s request for advice on suitable candidates to write her late husband’s life. Those seeking the detail must go to Roberts’s thesis to see Hancock’s recommendations which fell into two main groups. These groups were: ‘experienced journalists possessing some proven academic quality’, Alan Moorehead at the top of the list followed by Geoffrey Blainey, Douglas Brass and Clive Turnbull; and ‘academic persons’ led by Melbourne University historian Kathleen Fitzpatrick, ‘a most cultured and discriminating person who has proved herself to be a good biographer (though she) has always followed political affairs from a left centre point of view’, ANU political scientist Leicester Webb and Adelaide University historian Hugh Stretton; with historian Lionel Wigmore, in Hancock’s view, falling between the other two groups. Elisabeth Murdoch did not take up Hancock’s suggestions and the matter lay until C. E. ‘Ted’ Sayers was commissioned by the family following publication of his well-reviewed David Syme biography in 1965.

‘Great affairs magnetised Murdoch’ the anonymous Herald & Weekly Times scribes wrote in their Keith Murdoch encomium, their late employer possessing the ‘ability to make his influence felt in decisive places’. The Australian parliament was one such place and Australian prime ministers have been particular targets of Murdoch

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11 Papers of Lloyd Dumas, MS 4849, National Library of Australia.
12 One small jarring common element between Roberts’s thesis (p. 14) and Before Rupert (p. xv) is Richard Casey’s wife Maie being referred to as ‘Ethel’, a first name never used—in the same way that Rupert Murdoch was never called by his first name ‘Keith’. Similarly, C. E. Sayers is referred to as Charles E. Sayers when he was known as ‘Ted’ and published under C. E. Sayers.
15 Keith Murdoch, Journalist, 35.
influence. From the time Keith Murdoch was appointed federal parliamentary reporter for the Age in 1910, just before Australia’s fourth federal election, through to the forty-fourth election this year, Murdochs—Keith, then Rupert—have been players in Australian politics.

Despite 40 elections and more than a century of influence, the Murdochs have little presence in either the Paul Strangio, Paul ‘t Hart and James Walter work The Pivot of Power: Australian Prime Ministers and Political Leadership, 1949–2016 or the companion volume Settling the Office: The Australian Prime Ministership from Federation to Reconstruction (2016). This is understandable in relation to The Pivot of Power since Keith Murdoch died just three years into the book’s span. Keith Murdoch nevertheless gets two index entries, both relating to the early years of Robert Menzies’s second prime ministership, while Rupert Murdoch is surprisingly absent from the index altogether. In contrast, prime ministerial casualties over the last decade rate Rupert Murdoch as a very significant factor in their career trajectories indeed. It is not that the authors are unconscious of media as an issue. One focus of the volume is the ‘phenomenon of leader-centred politics’ and how the ‘advent of the “celebrity” medium of television recasts the relationship between leaders and the public’ (SHW, p. 5). These and other changes like the bigger bureaucracy and burgeoning ministerial staffs have contributed, as the authors cleverly put it, to the ‘elevation of the “metabolic rate” of the prime ministership’ (SHW, p. 5).

The Pivot of Power historicises the changing character of the Australian prime ministership and, against the backdrop of considerable upheaval, locates the roots of recent churn at the top in the ‘seismic changes’ of recent decades (SHW, p. 6). It recaps leadership and institutional changes from the second Menzies prime ministership onwards and asks whether it is now an impossible job (SHW, pp. 292–306). This is a pertinent question, one about which they are fairly optimistic despite a recent prime ministerial turnover rate so high it has become a matter of international comment.

Strangio, ‘t Hart and Walter point to three causes for hope: the fact that policy cycles come and go and that a ‘new dawn’ will arrive eventually, that institutional responses to changing circumstances in Australia have historically been robust and may continue to be so, and that the ‘myth of the strong leader’ is in trouble, against

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the backdrop of recent experience, with the return of ‘talented ensembles’ possibly
nigh (SHW, pp. 304–06). The prime ministership has been a ‘hardy and adaptable
institution’, they argue, and may yet prove so again (SHW, p. 306).

The authors of The Pivot of Power and its companion volume are political scientists
who, unusually among their number these days, bring history and biography to
their scholarship in a really effective way. At a time when historians arguably need
to engage with and do more political history, and when political science is groaning
under the weight of algebraic imperatives, Strangio, ‘t Hart and Walter have provided
a strong, historically informed overview of a key role in our national life. Paperback
editions with wide distribution would be welcome. As political scientists, however,
the constrained prose does not really charge the reader with a feel for the ‘seismic
changes’ of recent decades to which they allude. While their cautious optimism
is welcome, and comforting, they perhaps underrate the possibility that we are at
a historic moment of change when the old self-righting mechanisms will no longer
prevail. If that is the case, Rupert Murdoch and News Corporation are likely to be
found to have played no small part in it.